

HIGHLIGHT

Consultation Drive Ends

TBR Correspondent
Thimphu, May 29

Began from Thimphu, the nationwide tour of the king and the crown prince for consultation on the drafted constitution ended in Trongsa on May 26.



The meetings have been organized as part of the attempts of the king to devolve his traditional powers that political parties are looked upon to carry Bhutan into the future after the constitution comes into enforcement in 2008.

Reports of the consultation had always been shown that people were not happy with the king giving up his powers to let the political parties rule the country. And the king and crown prince primarily focused on civil duties of a citizen that the role of political parties, independence of judiciary, formation of cabinet, civil liberties and rights. In the last meeting in Trongsa, the Crown Prince began it by relating the difficulties and hardships borne by past generations of Bhutanese monarchs and the first three kings of Bhutan to bring peace and stability in the kingdom. Relating to the certain change in Indian politics soon after the enthronement of present king, crown prince said, "Bhutan was like a leaf floating on the river, unsure whether it might sink or float or which direction it might be carried." On the command of the king in 2001 and the

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Sit-in Begins Again International community urged to look into the matter

Bhutan News Service
Kathmandu, May 25

Kathmandu, May 25: Bhutanese refugee will sit in for hunger strike in front of the UN house and a few diplomatic missions in Kathmandu from June 2 to draw attention of the international community for early solution of refugee issue.

Talking to Bhutan News Service, Bhutanese human rights activist Tek Nath Rizal said the strike will continue at least for three months if international community and government of Nepal do not commit to reinvigorate the repatriation process of over hundred thousand refugees at the earliest possible.

Some 40 Bhutanese will sit in the strike at the initial phase but number will be increased gradually. Refugees have been staging relay hunger strike in all camps since three months demanding international intervention into the issue. June 2 is celebrated as the coronation anniversary of King Jigme, since he was enthroned in 1974.

Rizal demanded that Nepal government should no

more involve in the bilateral talks with Bhutan and ask the international community to tackle the problem. "It is the issue between the Bhutanese citizens and Bhutanese government. Nepal has no meaning to involve in it. Only Nepal should do is to call the international community to take up the issue," he said.

In middle of the strike in Kathmandu, a team of Bhutanese leaders will go to Indian capital of New Delhi to lobby with the Indian leaders, both in government and in opposition, for increasing India's role in Bhutanese movement for repatriation and establishment of democracy.

The visit of Bhutanese leaders will coincide with the conference to be held by South Asian Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR) in New Delhi in support of Bhutanese movement. SAFHR, led by former prime minister of India Indar Kumar Gujral, had decided to launch campaign in support of repatriation of Bhutanese refugee in its recently held meeting in Colombo.

Nepal-Bhutan the Issue of Exiled Bhutanese

Bhutan News Service
Kathmandu, May 29

Nepalese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli has called on the

Bhutan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Khandu Wangchuck at Kuala Lumpur on Monday.

According to the Nepal's national news agency, Rastriya Samachar Samittee, the two leaders met on the sidelines of the Ministerial Meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement, being held at Putrajaya International Convention Centre in Malaysia.

During the meeting, Nepalese DPM Oli expressed the view that the new Government of Nepal was eager to make a fresh beginning in the bilateral talks between the two countries to bring an end to the long festering problem of exiled Bhutanese in Nepal once and for all, the agency reported.

The bilateral talk between the Nepalese and Bhutanese governments has been halted since 2001 due to political instability in Nepal. Bhutanese in exile have been pressing the Nepalese authority to withdraw from bilateral negotiations and hand over the issue to the international community immediately.

No Press Freedom in Bhutan: IFJ

TBR Correspondent
Kathmandu, May 29

International Federation of Journalist (IFJ) has stated that the press freedom in Bhutan is very poor.

In its fourth annual press freedom report released on the occasion of International Press Freedom Day, the international media watchdog has criticized the Bhutanese authority for controlling press freedom in the country while the king has announced to go for democracy after 2008.

The Bhutan part of the report was coordinated by Association of Press Freedom Activists (APFA) Bhutan. This is the first time IFJ has included situation of press

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Peaceful solution

With the change of political status of Nepalese Maoists after the success of people's movement, communist activists from the exiled Bhutanese community have begun to carry out their campaigns openly.

Few meetings have been organized in Kathmandu and in Jhapa. They had claimed that their 'people's war' is under preparation and that it will erupt with the participation of people living within Bhutan.

Tactically, this is what India wanted. While Bhutanese authority come closer with Indian government to evict the southern Bhutanese saying they posed serious threat to the nation's survival. This has created much more threat to Bhutan's sovereignty. On one side, Bhutanese regime had to hand over the final decision authority on most cases to the Indian government and on the other side, one-fifth of the country's population has been irritated by the government acts. Obviously, over suppression will have negative results.

Surely, the underground communist will get support from India, may not be openly. The communist armed rebellion in Nepal has proved this. The only alternative for the Bhutanese regime when the armed rebellion reached the apex is to call India for military support. Consequently, the number of Indian military presence in Bhutan will increase, the trend started since India sent its force to flush out ULFA and Bodo militants from Bhutan. The force has not returned.

So, the result will be bitterer for throne owner in Bhutan. If its does not want the situation to come, the regime has only one alternative – let the exiled Bhutanese returned with honor and let them live in their own land. The communist group should also take care of the sovereignty of the kingdom that has been overshadowed by the India's political influence. So, lets go for peaceful reconciliation.

Bhutan's Outsiders in Limbo

The harsh conditions endured by the Lhotshampa minority in Bhutan are a stain on the Himalayan kingdom's harmonious image. They may also become a threat to regional security.

The broad leaves of banana trees obscure hundreds of rows of bamboo huts set out in compact grids that reach the fringes of the forest. The intersecting pathways are neatly swept, and many huts sport fenced gardens of white and yellow roses. Outside their huts, women sit and talk while they work at their wool looms. The men play carrom, a traditional board game, or drink tea while children play or attend school. Life seems tranquil in Beldangi II Extension.

But the appearance of order belies a situation fraught with tension. Beldangi II Extension is one of seven refugee camps run by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in southeast Nepal. Bhutanese refugees – currently numbering 105,000 – have lived in such camps for some fifteen years. They are primarily a Hindu-minority ethnic group known in Bhutan as Lhotshampas (southerners), who make up about a quarter of the country's population. They settled as farmers in the southern lowlands in the late 19th century, many with an express invitation from Bhutan, which needed laborers to help clear its malaria-infested jungles.

It was only in 1958 that Lhotshampas were officially accorded Bhutanese nationality and became more involved in the running of the country. But policy reversals in the 1970s and 1980s required all citizens to conform to the majority Drukpa culture, to wear Drukpa dress and to learn Dzongkha, the national language. Further measures followed: requirements for Bhutanese citizenship were tightened and, through a census conducted only in the south, many Lhotshampas' status as citizens was challenged.

Their sense of discrimination led to politicization and protest. In 1990, the Bhutan Peoples Party was set up, and the country saw its first mass demonstrations demanding human rights and judicial reforms. The participants were branded dissidents and "anti-nationals". Several arrests, including that of Tek Nath Rizal, a royal advisory councilor, and reports of torture fanned the flames of an already volatile situation. As the census gathered pace, it was enforced with more draconian measures, which led to arrests, threats of arrest, further reports of torture or death, property confiscation and deportations.

Today, the protracted state of affairs in the camps in Nepal is considered normal. The hope of repatriation as an attainable goal evaporated with the collapse in 2003 of a citizenship-verification pilot project aimed at resolving the issue.

Between image and reality

To the outside world, Bhutan remains largely uncharted territory. But the last fifty years have seen the country emerge cautiously from a cocoon in a slow and deliberate march toward modernization and what many see as enlightened and forward-thinking social policies. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has famously declared that he is more interested in generating "gross national happiness" than gross national product. This maxim of people before profit – coupled with bans on smoking, a claim to be the last nation on earth to introduce television and admirably stringent environmental-protection laws – has provided Bhutan with a progressive image.

But the country actually presents two faces to the world. While Bhutan is rightfully lauded on one hand by environmental and spiritual groups as a beacon of the developing world for its progressive policies, it is condemned on the other by the human-rights movement for having rendered one-sixth of its population stateless. A recent survey conducted by ethicaltraveller.com ranked Bhutan second best in its approach toward ecological issues, but second worst for its humanitarian record.

What has muddied the waters is the country's attempts to preserve its indigenous Buddhist culture. From within its cocoon, Bhutan has observed its neighbors grappling with the difficulties presented by the flow of people across borders and the effects of tourism. The influx of backpackers has seen the dilution of Nepal's rich cultural heritage, while Nepali migrants have superseded the Buddhist population in the neighboring Indian state of Sikkim.

In response, Bhutan has sought to contain its heritage through the laws that led to the expulsion of a section of the Nepali-origin community – an action that it sees as a necessary evil, as collateral damage, in order to preserve its essential culture.

Any person classified as "un-Bhutanese" was asked to leave the country under threat of imprisonment and, according to some reports, torture or death. Even some families who had been verified as genuine Bhutanese were coerced into leaving. Aita Singh Gurung was a boy of seven when his family left Bhutan. Although his family were classified as genuine Bhutanese, he says, they were still forced to abandon their farm. "They were threatening us. In the census, they were saying that within fifteen days we had to leave the country; otherwise, we would be shot or tortured". Many were persuaded to sign "voluntary migration forms" – written in Dzongkha, a language that many Lhotshampas did not read or speak – by which they gave up their Bhutanese citizenship.

In the camps

While the refugees remain outwardly positive today, scratch beneath the surface and the more disturbing features of a long-term refugee situation begin to emerge. Donor fatigue has set in, and of the original non-governmental organizations brought in as UNHCR's implementing partners, only the Lutheran World Federation, Caritas Nepal and the World Food Program remain. Depression, suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, dropping out of school, domestic and gender-based violence and trafficking in girls have all escalated in the camps. Sister Gemma, a Roman Catholic nun with the Jesuit Refugee Service, arrived via Caritas Nepal two-and-a-half years ago to implement a counseling service. "Since I have come, the situation has deteriorated so much", she says. "Hopelessness has set in."

In particular, Sister Gemma has noticed that the levels of anxiety and depression increase once children reach their final year of education in the camps, a time when they begin to think about how they will support their families. Additionally, she has been chronicling the more "vulnerable" cases, particularly orphaned children who have been left to fend for themselves through suicide or abandonment by their parents. In many cases, the eldest sibling – who has to care for younger ones – feels the most pressure and is, therefore, most susceptible to emotional problems.

While education in the camps has always been one of its strongest points, absenteeism is now rising and pass rates are declining – a situation partly explained by the exodus of qualified teachers seeking better pay in Nepal's private schools. (Teaching is effectively the only form of employment the refugees, who often have strong knowledge of English, can pursue.)

In the early years of exile, the mood in the camps was optimistic. Many felt the disruption was short term and would be resolved through negotiation with the international community. Since the collapse of the citizenship verification project in 2003, however, a mood of dejection has set in and pragmatism has replaced idealism. Most of the young have left to pursue work in Nepal or India, or have joined the exodus of migrant workers to the Gulf states, tempted by the possibilities of earning sufficient money to buy Nepali or Indian citizenship.

Indra Timsina, one of the few young men who has stayed, has noticed the decline in morale and community spirit. "Previously, if one person died in another sector, the whole people would carry firewood for the cremation and join in the procession. For the last two to three years, if someone dies, no one cares. The unity has disappeared". Emphasis has shifted from the collective to the individual.

The prospects for a satisfactory outcome to the refugee situation look bleak. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal has pushed the issue to the bottom of that government's agenda. In Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has drafted a new constitution that will pave the way for democracy and reduce some of the powers the monarchy currently holds. On 17 December 2005, the king announced his intention to abdicate and hand over power to his son when the country holds its first democratic elections in 2008.

To what extent this will change the attitude toward the refugees is yet to be seen. Bhutan's new constitution contains the same citizenship conditions as before, and it is unlikely that Lhotshampas will reach positions of power within the new system. Significantly, however, the constitution allows for the creation of an independent news media. Until now Bhutan's only newspaper has been the English language Kuensel. Bhutan's information and communication ministry announced on 1 February 2006 that two new independent weekly papers – the Bhutan Times and the Bhutan Observer – would begin publishing in April. The hope among the refugee community is that this might stimulate debate about the position of the Lhotshampas within Bhutanese society.

Human-rights groups have also expressed concern for the Lhotshampas still resident in Bhutan. The annual census has produced population figures that continually show a decline in the number of citizens, while non-nationals reportedly are on the increase. The statistics have aroused fears that the government may be planning to expel the remainder of the Lhotshampa population.

A regional concern

India, in its role as Bhutan's main development partner, has the potential to break the stalemate, asserts Brigid Mayes of the Bhutanese Refugee Support Group. "They could solve it tomorrow if they wanted to", she says. A map of Bhutan reveals much about its external political influences. China, in the form of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, looms large to the north, behind a wall of Himalayan peaks. To the south, east and west, Bhutan is cradled by the fingers of land that make up India's northeastern frontier – the states

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From Regime India to Assist Bhutan for 2008 Polls

TBR Correspondent
Thimphu, May 29

Election commission has given its assurances to support Bhutan for its first election to be held in 2008.

There are seven exchange visits of officials of commission from both the countries have been organized since a year. Indian Chief Election Commissioner B. B. Tandon recently traveled to Bhutan for eight days to train Bhutanese officials for forthcoming election providing Bhutanese citizens to use their right to voting for the first time.

With a memorandum of understanding to be signed between the two election commissions on the electoral process, the Election Commission of India would help with Indian expertise, the training of Bhutanese people, and materials including voting machines.

The exchange of visits, training of Bhutanese election workers, and the exposure to the electoral processes in India would go a long way in helping the Election Commission of Bhutan to prepare for the historic elections to be held in 2008.



BIMSTEC Forms Cultural Industries Commission

TBR Correspondent
Thimphu, May 23

The first BIMSTEC ministerial meeting on culture held in Paro on May 23-24 agreed to set up a cultural industries commission and an observatory center, to promote cultural industries among member states.

The institution of the commission is expected to encourage rural people to practice their age-old profession hence limiting migration, reducing poverty and strengthening community life.

The commission is expected to frame supportive legislation and regulations, provide access to finance and loan, grant free certification on cultural products and opportunities for training and professional development of craftsmanship. The commission would also help in easy access to relevant, appropriate and cheap ICT. The meet also endorsed the adopted the 'Paro Initiative', a set of vision and strategies serving as a roadmap for the socio-economic development driven by creative cultural industries.

Communists Come Open

TBR Correspondent
Kathmandu, May 23

Kathmandu May 23: Communist Party of Bhutan (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) held open meets with Kathmandu based exile Bhutanese students, youths and teachers urging them to extend possible moral, logistic and financial support.

According to Nabin and Chintan Chhetri they are holding such meeting as directed by the central office. Chintan said they are including all the ethnic groups in their party from Bhutan. 'Sharchops Mukti Morcha will soon come onto air' he said. He claimed the party's majority of the programs are almost based inside the country.

Nabin said they too have a sense of respect to other political and non-political Bhutanese organization. 'Our party has come to a position of launching physical punishment' he lamented. Nabin strongly urged Bhutanese staying in Kathmandu to extend five percent financial aid from their monthly salary to uplift the position of party.

Three other Kathmandu-based party activists were handed over the responsibility of collecting possible support including finance. Questions are raised whether donated funds will be properly utilised.

The two cadres denied revealing their position in the party. Communist Party of Bhutan (MLM) had held several rounds of such meet in Kathmandu and Lalaitpur since the restoration of democracy in Nepal.

Exile Voice

BCP Asks Physical Participation and Financial From Exiled Bhutanese

Desvaktia Mishra
Kathmandu, May 29

Damak May 25: Shortly after the completion of interaction programs with exile Bhutanese staying outside camps Bhutan Communist Party - Marxist-Leninist-Maoist (BCP-MLM) has been launching campaigns with students and youths in camps seeking financial aid and physical participation.

During a meeting held in Goldhap camp on May 24, the communist activists claimed they have started their

new phase of massive recruitment for party militia. They sought exiled youths for physical participation.

Similarly BCP urged Bhutanese working in donor agencies to share five percent of the salary for the movement.

Earlier, they had urged similar support from Bhutanese staying in Kathmandu and other cities in Nepal and India. They told people in Kathmandu that party's programs are based in Bhutan.

TD Opens

TBR Correspondent
Kathmandu, May 23

The Nepal Government has decided to resume the issuing of travel documents to Tibetan and Bhutanese in exile on May 22.

Foreign affairs officials said they will issue the documents to them, allowing them to go abroad to attend meetings or for other necessary purposes. But they must receive recommendation from the home ministry.

The king-led Nepalese government had decided to halt issuing travel documents and also exit permits for Tibetan people in transit to asylum in India in October last year stating the refugees began to settle in foreign countries with that document. Since then, leaders have not been able to attend a number of international advocacy conferences. Since 2000, there have been no direct talks held between the two governments regarding repatriation of Bhutanese in exile.

"We could not attend as many 12 international conferences despite invitation due to travel restriction by Nepal's previous government," Bhutanese Human Rights leader Tek Nath Rizal said. Nepal Government's decision has helped us to travel to other countries for advocacy for our cause, he added. The former Nepalese government had stopped issuance of travel documents to refugees taking asylum in Nepal saying the refugees did not return from the country they go to.

Tibetan refugees have appealed to the Nepal Government to allow them to reopen the Tibetan Refugee Welfare Office (TRWO), which was closed by the government on January 21, 2005 on the charge of operating without registering with the government. There are less possibilities that this center will be allowed to reopen again.

Bhutan's Outsiders.....

of Sikkim, Assam, West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh. Some believe that Bhutan's expulsion of the Lhotshampas was influenced, in part, by Indian fears of the creation of a Nepali "super-state", incorporating Darjeeling, Sikkim and the south of Bhutan.

For India, what is most important is to keep open its communication with the expelled youth. The World Food Programme (WFP) in Damak, in the 2 March 2006, the BCP's and the world converge, movement in Nepal has been getting cuts down of the Party and factions in the country's

reluctance to become visibly involved in the dispute can also be partly explained by its reliance on good relations with Bhutan to control the flow of Assamese secessionist fighters, such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), across its borders.

Third countries – including the United States, Canada and Australia – have professed an interest in taking in some of the refugees. Currently, this is hindered by Nepal's reluctance to sign over exit forms permitting the refugees to travel outside the country. Some observers have argued that it is in Nepal's interests to retain the status quo: the establishment of UNHCR camps has brought an injection of development money into the area. Others believe that

Nepal still feels that the issue can be solved bilaterally.

The emphasis is beginning to move away from the – even One rights be as to the resident allowed gally. still have In campaign, drop in has been down of that by they

might force the hands of Nepal and the international community. Most observers, however, believe that the more likely solution lies in a piecemeal approach, with a mix of repatriation to Bhutan, assimilation in Nepal and third-country settlement.

A hunger strike staged by the elders of the camps in January only exacerbated the refugees' frustration, given that little is reported of activities inside the facilities. Rumors have spread that the BCP's have attempted to recruit youth. The World Food Programme (WFP) in Damak, in the 2 March 2006, the BCP's and the world converge, movement in Nepal has been getting cuts down of the Party and factions in the country's

borders might become a serious problem if the current state of affairs is not resolved.

Indra Timsina has no doubt that, if nothing changes, some of the youth of Beldangi II Extension could be radicalized: "If [the international community] do not focus on the problem now, there will be a great problem. That is the problem of terrorists. Most of the young people will be engaged ... it will reach a critical point if they don't address it now."

Bhutan's assertion that many of the expelled Lhotshampas were dissidents and terrorists is, at the very least, overblown; the reality is rather of a peaceful people being subjected to extreme pressures and provocation. But the danger is that if there is no easing of the Lhotshampas' plight, such anathemas may in some cases turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Charlie Devereux is journalist with OpenDemocracy based in London)

Pres Freedom... from page 1

freedom in Bhutan in its annual report.

Young and dynamic Bhutanese journalists (associated with APFA-Bhutan) are now determined to introduce and defend freedom of speech, expression, press and publicity (in Bhutan), the report reads. Foolwing is the full report:

BHUTAN – SILENCED AND CONTROLLED

Bhutan is a tiny Himalayan country lying between China and India. Bhutan's modern political history dates back to 1907 when a hereditary monarchy of the Wangchuck dynasty was established under the leadership of Sir Ugyen Wangchuk, a then provincial governor of Trongsa province. Since then, India directs Bhutan's foreign policy (stated as 'guidance' in the friendship treaty of 1949) and military supply as well as being Bhutan's largest donor for economic development.

The fourth hereditary king of the Wangchuk dynasty, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, introduced many ethnic policies including 'Bhutanisation', which aimed to displace the culture, language, religion, dress etc. of other ethnic groups. Being a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic country, cultural diversity is an obvious feature of the Bhutanese population. But owing to low levels of education and a disadvantaged lifestyle, with many living in isolated areas untouched by roads and communication, many people are not exposed to political issues. The government has taken advantage of this situation and framed policies to prevent ethnic groups, aside from the ruling Ngalong, from using their mother tongue, wearing their ethnic dress, practising their religion and so on. Over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin have been languishing in seven United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) managed camps in eastern Nepal since 1990 after they were expelled as alleged 'non-nationals'.

Bhutan is run by an absolute monarchy. There are no private organisations, institutions, political parties or social organisations. Bhutan bans political parties and any other form of organisation. The government bars people from criticizing the acts of the government or raising questions about the Royal family members including the king. The Driglam Nam Zha (the so-called dress and language code) and other traditional laws define anyone as a terrorist or anti-national if they are found to have spoken against the government or members of the royal family. The right to free speech, yet to be clarified, is restricted. Two tabloids have been registered recently for publication. One of them, *The Bhutan Times* (a weekly), has launched an online news service (www.bhutantimes.com) and stated that its main aim was to resist the repatriation of more than 100,000 Bhutanese who were exiled by the Bhutanese Government in the early 1990s.

Thus, the newly emerging media houses have been co-opted to become repressive agents for ethnic cleansing in Bhutan. Indeed, the news portal has not posted any critical news items about the Bhutanese Government. In the name of a free press and the right of the Bhutanese people to information, a radio station and television network (both run by Bhutan Broadcasting Service – owned by the State) and a weekly newspaper (*Kuensel*, published by state-owned Kuensel Corporation) exist, however their news content is strictly censored and they have become mere mouthpieces of the government.

Nor are there any private publication houses or organizations working in the field of the right to information. Specifically, no person is permitted to launch a private organisation or publication house with these aims. As such any one speaking out against the government, king or highprofile bureaucrats faces imprisonment. A hundred thousand people were banished from their homeland while protesting for the right to organisation, speech and culture in 1990. The Kuensel Corporation publishes Bhutan's only national newspaper, *Kuensel*, started in 1960. Most of the reporters have three-month basic training with *The Strait Times* of Singapore.

The paper is distributed every Saturday throughout the country by a string of sales agents appointed in all the dzongkhags, dungkhags and towns, while subscribers overseas are fed through mail service/e-mail. *Kuensel* readers are, generally, people with highly placed social and economic standing within the community and expatriates, posted in diplomatic missions, international organisations and multinational companies.

Early beginnings of the struggle for freedom of expression

Bhutan has been a member of the United Nations system since 1971 and is a signatory to many of UN conventions and declarations. But people are barred from enjoying their birth right as *bona fide* citizens of the country. Bhutan agreed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as soon as it became the member of the UN. Yet, Article 19 of the declaration (relating to freedom of expression) is yet to be implemented. The right to freedom of expression is one of the key elements of the human rights that states must guarantee to their citizens. Recently, Bhutan has been moving toward becoming a democratic kingdom under the leadership of King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. A positive move since, democratic values and people's rights cannot be safeguarded in the absence of an independent media.

With the promulgation of a draft constitution of the kingdom of Bhutan, there are signs of hope that the freedom of press it envisages will become a reality. The media is one of the major components that can demonstrate the democratic system in a country by explaining the extent of the people's participation in governance. A vigilant media is essential for a free and democratic society and also plays a role in ensuring that the government fulfils its responsibilities and obligations.

The Association of Press Freedom Activists (APFA), Bhutan, was initially established in 2003 and was formally created on May 3, 2004 on World Press Freedom Day to campaign for freedom of the press, and freedom of speech and expression in a democratic Bhutan. APFA is not affiliated to any political party. Young and dynamic Bhutanese journalists are now determined to introduce and defend freedom of speech, expression, press and publicity.

Press law and press freedom

There are no laws, rules or regulations regarding the press in Bhutan, nor is there press freedom. Government officials censor the news to be published or broadcasted. The government not only discourages private publications but also imposes serious penalties. Before 1990 there were few demands from the people.

Since then political groups have begun advocating press freedom and some media workers have received media training in Britain, the Netherlands, India and Singapore. *The Citizenship Act* states that anyone who has acquired Bhutanese citizenship and involved in acts against the king, such as speaking against the royal government or associating with people involved in these activities, shall be deprived of their citizenship.

Foreign cable television is banned in Bhutan as the government argues that free access to foreign television would spoil Bhutan's national identity and culture. In 1989 the king banned private satellite dishes and dismantled 28 privately owned dishes. Access to foreign television and the Internet was restored in 1999, however, some Indian news and entertainment channels were again banned in August 2005. International reporters have limited access to Bhutan.

Despite the National Assembly Rule no. 11 (drafted in 1953) which states that "Every member shall have the full right and privilege to express his thought in the Assembly. No rule or law can interfere with the member's freedom of expression," there are several constraints on press freedom. Unfortunately, the recently drafted 34-point constitution, released on March 26, 2005, does not adequately encourage the development of journalism and press freedom.

Report by Association of Press Freedom Activists (APFA Bhutan), Kathmandu Nepal.

Insurance Graft

TBR Correspondent
Thimphu, May 23

Four employees of the Royal Insurance Corporation of Bhutan in Phuentsholing, who received compulsorily retirement on May 15 has been reported to have made false medical claims ranging from Nu.300,000 to Nu. 20,000.

The claims were made in 2005 and 2006.

An investigation team formed to investigate claims made by 10 employees receiving financial assistance from the company for medical treatment during that period revealed false claims made by four of its senior employees.

Some of the patients were treated for cancer, gynecological disorders and heart problems.

The corporation provides Nu. 1.3 million for an employee or the employee's dependant for medical treatment.

A cashier was also terminated for "misuse of authority" with is alleged to have withdrawn Nu. 100,000 from his account without seeking approval.

New Appointments

TBR Correspondent
Thimphu, May 23

Kinzang Wangdi, programme director of the Renewable Natural Research Centre in Bumthang, has been appointed as the dzongda of Gasa dzongkhag.

Kencho Tenzin, coordination officer of the cabinet secretariat, has been selected for the post of Dungpa. One Dungpa post is still vacant.

The new appointments become effective from June 1.

While the regime has been advocating for democratic reforms in the country, the nomination of high officials without

consulting their subordinates is questioned in Bhutan'.

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